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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Michael Barber, 61, Des Moines, Iowa
Meredith Ferguson
Iowa Department for the Blind Building
May 5, 2011, 2:00 PM**

Meredith Ferguson: This is Meredith Ferguson and I'm interviewing Michael Barber. The date is May 5, 2011 and the time is 2:00 PM. The interview is taking place at the Iowa Department for the Blind building in Des Moines, Iowa.

Before we start, could you give me your full name and where you live?

Michael Barber: I am Michael Barber, and I live at 2721 34th St. in Des Moines, Iowa 50310.

Ferguson: Thank you. This interview is part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Michael do I have your permission to record this interview?

Barber: Yes, ma'am.

Ferguson: Okay. Thank you. To start off, could you give me your age, and where you were born and raised?

Barber: I am 61, soon to be 62. I was born here in Des Moines, raised here in Des Moines.

Ferguson: Wow! Do you have any siblings?

Barber: I have four brothers and two sisters.

Ferguson: Okay. Are any of them visually impaired?

Barber: Just one. I have a twin brother who is blind.

Ferguson: Okay. Do you both suffer from the same...?

Barber: Yeah. We were born with what is called retrolental fibroplasia, which means we were born prematurely and had to have oxygen and at that time they didn't; they weren't

putting glasses over the eyes of babies who got oxygen, so the retinas were damaged.

Ferguson: Oh wow. Was that a fairly common thing at that time?

Barber: Back in the '30s and '40s it was. We got in sort of on the end of that whole thing. They discovered then what the problem was, and that's why they started putting glasses over baby's eyes.

Ferguson: Okay. So have you, since then have you had any vision at all?

Barber: I have not.

Ferguson: You have not, okay. Where did you attend grade school, here in Des Moines?

Barber: Actually I attended school from kindergarten through 12th grade at the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School.

Ferguson: You did? Okay.

Barber: Yes.

Ferguson: Would you be willing to talk just a little bit about that, kind of, your experience?

Barber: Yeah. You know, at that time, back in the '50s...In the '40s and '50s and before that really, attending the School

for the Blind really probably was about the best option for the blind person; not just here in Iowa, but in several states. So, my folks felt that it was best to send us there where we would get the kind of skills training, and so forth, that we needed and get the education we needed. I think that they didn't really know if there was anything available for a blind person attending a public school at that time. So, they elected to have us go there.

It was an interesting experience. Made a lot of friends there. I think got a decent education. I will not say that it was top-notch, but I will say that it was satisfactory. The disadvantage was that I missed out on a lot of family stuff because we didn't go home but every two weeks or so, and then only for a weekend and then Christmas. And, let's see, Christmas and Easter and some of those holiday times. So, there was that disadvantage, but we made long lasting friendships there.

Ferguson: You mentioned that you, that the drawback was that you missed out on all that family stuff. Did you ever feel disconnected from your family since you lived...?

Barber: Yeah. You know, in fact, we did. But, I only really realized later on as we got older and found out some things that happened in the family; and things that we weren't even a part of. I remember thinking, "Gosh, I wish I had been there for that or whatever." But, we didn't, we just didn't get in on a lot of stuff, which was too bad.

Ferguson: That feeling came later? That you really didn't miss out...

Barber: Yeah. I guess the reality of it didn't set in until later, on when my brother or sister would talk about different things that had happened while we were at school. "Oh, we didn't know that."

Ferguson: Did you feel...Did your brothers or sisters treat you any differently because you were blind?

Barber: I don't think they did. The reason they didn't was, we were fortunate to have a mother who decided at the outset that we were treated just like everybody else. When she read the books that said children who were blind probably won't crawl until they're two or three years old or more, they won't act the same and all this sort of thing; she really decided that just wasn't going to happen. She wasn't going to hear of it. Now, my father was another story. He always felt that we needed to be treated differently, you know, but that was just the way he was. That was the way he grew up and my grandmother on dad's side always used to get after mom when she spanked us for something. "Oh, you shouldn't spank those kids. After all, they're blind." Mom said, "No, if they deserved to get a whippin' they're going to get it." And so, she never really treated us any differently in that respect, which was a good thing.

Ferguson: Did you ever feel, I guess, the mixed feelings that you got really affected how you viewed yourself?

Barber: Um...I don't think so. No, I learned to deal with that. I remember the first...when we first went to school. The first day I remember standing at the door of the building we were in, you know, and Mom and Dad were gone. It was...I

remember that lonely feeling. But, you know, it didn't take long to get over it. We started mixing and mingling with the different kids and stuff and it was fun. We had fun. We sort of soon forgot about it. That was kind of nice. That part of it was really good. We had a lot of good adults, supportive adults and everything to work with. It was a lot of fun; I enjoyed it.

Ferguson: Good. Did you do public school at all or was it Vinton all the way through?

Barber: It was Vinton all the way through. We had a chance, in 10th grade. I remember during the summer after school was out, we had gotten a letter and I don't even remember who it was from, giving us the opportunity to enter public school here in Des Moines. I...We thought about it for a little bit, not very long because I didn't have any information. I didn't know...I was worried about it. Okay, so if I go, "How am I going to get my books? How am I going to get my assignments done? How am I going to do? How am I going to participate in all these different activities that kids participate in?" Because, I had just been in the school for the blind; I had never really been in a public school type setting. And so, I was really concerned about that. I was really afraid Mom was going to tell us we were going to go to public school; but she gave us a choice.

As I think back on it now, I wish I would have asked more questions, and I didn't know who to talk to about it. Mom didn't have any information, so I knew it wouldn't be her. But, I didn't know who to talk to, especially during the summer. We were away from school so I didn't have anybody there to talk to about, okay, so what would I do if I

went to public school? How would I do this and how would I...I didn't know anybody to talk to about that. That was a major contributor to me not going to public school. I just didn't know how I was going to get things done. I didn't, I had no idea.

Ferguson: Did you...You didn't have any interaction with the Department then?

Barber: Not yet. Nope, I didn't.

Ferguson: Was that just lack of information or was it you were told to avoid the Department?

Barber: Yeah, good question. I can see you've heard this before.

Ferguson: Yeah. It's cropped up a couple of times.

Barber: (Laughter) I'm sure it has. We, at the time, and we didn't get a lot of information. But, we were basically told that the Commission for the Blind was a terrible institution and some place we wanted to avoid, and you wanted to avoid that Jernigan guy because he was just power hungry and blah, blah, blah. So, what I heard was all I knew. I didn't know, at that time, anybody who had gone until the next year. I talked to some people who were are the Commission. Of course, they spoke very highly of it. So, you know, the more...You know, if you talk about the Commission for the Blind and school it was frowned upon. You were ridiculed. If you carried a white cane from class to class you were accused of being "Commissionized" and,

oh, it was terrible. Ridicule, you know what that does to a teenager? Teenagers, unfortunately, are real sensitive to that kind of stuff.

So, we were taught cane travel, but only to use it when we went off campus. Certainly, you wouldn't want to carry it around school. That would be awful. It was quite the concept and so when, I think, when we were juniors, Counselors from the commission for the Blind came to talk to us to see if we were interested in attending after we graduated; coming into the Center. I was. I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't. I'm sure they had already talked to my folks. Who knows what they said. I just felt like I just wanted to, even though there was a lot of pressure not to do it from the school. You know, looking back on it, you know whatever was between the school and the Commission at the time, and there was definitely bad blood. I just felt like they shouldn't, as an institution, say to their students, "You shouldn't go there." I never did think that was right. So I...It was too bad because as I learn and look back on it, it seems to me that the Commission for the Blind and the school should have been able to work closely together.

Ferguson: That seems to have been the general consensus of that.

Barber: I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised.

Ferguson: So, did you learn cane travel while you went to Vinton?

Barber: Yes, I did. I learned, and of course, Vinton is a very small town. So, we learned some basic stuff in Vinton. We

learned street crossing. We had more than one travel teacher. One guy left and then somebody else took over. I think I had three different teachers. They taught a little bit different; between the three of them they had different techniques.

If we needed to do anything major, like bigger cities, we went to Cedar Rapids. And so, my first experience using a cane on an escalator was in Cedar Rapids. I had been on escalators before, but I had been petrified of them because I didn't know, without having a cane and stuff, I didn't know how to tell for sure when the end was coming. When it was going to start and all that kind of...And, I was afraid of them. I'd get on them. So, then when I learned to use a cane to determine...I thought, "Oh, this is much better. This works a lot better. I understand this now. It makes more sense." But, I've got a good sense of crossing busy streets in Cedar Rapids, and learning to listen for traffic patterns, and all that stuff. It was interesting. The one thing that I wasn't taught a lot of was...how do I want to say...orientation. In other words, how to tell where you were and how you got there. And landmarks and all, that sort of thing; they didn't teach a lot of that. At least not what I considered. They didn't teach you how to figure out how you're going to get someplace. They'd give you the instructions for here, here, here, here. And, instead of saying, "Okay, now you know how the streets are arranged here in Vinton. I want you to go down to such-and-such a place."

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Barber: "And, you figure out how you're going to get there and I'll meet you there. We didn't do any of that stuff, which

was unfortunate. But, that's where I learned my cane travel. But, then I learned a lot more here in Des Moines when I came to the Center.

Ferguson: Kind of going off of that, after you graduated from Vinton did you come to the Center or did you go to college before?

Barber: I went to...I came to the Center, I think, a month or two after I left. No, it was two months after I graduated.

Ferguson: Okay. How long did you stay here?

Barber: I was here for almost a year.

Ferguson: Okay. You felt that, I guess, skills wise did you learn here or did you have kind of the foundation before you got here?

Barber: I had the foundation before I got here, but I didn't really have the best philosophy of blindness. And, it pretty much went along with what was taught here, but I still needed to learn things.

Ferguson: Could you maybe explain, I guess, an example maybe of how your philosophy was a little different?

Barber: I wasn't totally convinced when I came here that I could do literally anything I wanted to if I decided I wanted to. I think that was the big thing. I think, when I was in Vinton, I think I felt that there were definite, definite limitations in my future, and I wasn't sure how I was going

to get anywhere. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I wasn't sure how I was going to succeed.

So, when I got here, I started to hear about people who went to college, who became teachers, electrical engineers and all that sort of thing. We heard from those people and we spent a lot of time discussing situations and the business of blindness class. It was a good experience. We went out and chopped wood. Things that I never thought a blind guy could do. It was...We did it. I was like, "Wow! I can do all this stuff." There's all these other people who are doing the same thing. I thought that was pretty cool.

Ferguson: Nice. What did you decide to do after the Center?

Barber: Well, I was still young enough that I hadn't totally made up my mind yet. I, oh, just for a little while I kind of worked for this one guy and he sold imports; like souvenir type things. I did that for a little bit, but that wasn't working out very well. I wasn't too excited about the job, but I wanted to do something.

So, finally a Counselor says, "You might as well go to college." I thought, "What do I want to do that for?" I really did. At Vinton, back in the 10th grade when we were discussing what classes I was going...Well, it was done at the end of 9th grade...it was in 10th...We were discussing what classes are you going to take next year? One of the classes they were going to put me in was Algebra. I thought, "Okay, I've got to do that." The Principle, I never have forgotten this and never will. He sat there and he said, "Well, there's Algebra;" and then he said, "But you're not ever going to college anyway, so you don't need that." And, I believed him. That was an awful thing; I believed him.

That was the worse part of the whole thing. I thought, “Gee, if he doesn’t think I’m gonna then I must not be very smart or something.” So, I was not going to go to college. That was the last thing on my horizon. So, I wasn’t...So, when the counselor said, “You ought to just go to school, you know.” My attitude really wasn’t very good. I couldn’t figure out why I should. Nobody had really convinced me that I should. So, I started and I went about a half of a semester and I left. I said, “Nope. This is not for me.”

Ferguson: Where did you go?

Barber: Grandview Junior College. It’s too bad. I wish it would have, or I wish I would have stuck with it. I just got discouraged; I wasn’t interested. I didn’t have...I didn’t really know of anybody to sit down with and say, “I don’t understand why I am here.” I was afraid to verbalize that to somebody because I thought they’re going to think I’m really out in left field; not realizing there’s probably about seventy percent of the kids in school thought the same thing most likely. I thought, “Geez, I’m probably the only one who thinks that.” I left college and that was a big mistake.

So, then after that I got a job working at the Highway Commission in Ames and went up there to live for about four and a half years. I worked in their Planning and Programming is where it was. I did, I transcribed public hearings that they held when they were going to be putting a highway, or proposing highways in certain areas. That was sort of interesting. It was a job.

Ferguson: The transcribing, was that a skill you learned in Vinton or here at the Center?

Barber: I learned a lot of typing at school, but I also learned more at the Center. I was good at it. I was typing about 75 words per minute, there-bouts. I did okay with that. I was there, like I said, four and a half years. The Director of Field Operations at that time, John Taylor, thought that...’Cause I was thinking about actually going into the Food Service Program, the Business Enterprise Program. But, he thought I needed to grow up a little bit first. He was probably right. Looking back on it I think he was right. He said, “You go there and you learn some personal responsibility.” And he said, “You come back and talk to me later on.” So, after about four years, about four and a half years, I guess he decided that I was ready. So, I got into the Business Enterprise and I was doing that for about fifteen years. After that, well, I’m probably getting ahead of your questions.

Ferguson: Oh no you’re fine, really.

Barber: Then after that I left the Business Enterprise Program. I was really tired. It was hard work. I was in cafeterias and stuff.

Ferguson: Oh, I was just going to ask you if you did cafeterias.

Barber: I did mostly cafeterias, some vending, but mostly cafeterias. Those were twelve to fourteen-hour days pretty much.

Ferguson: Did you do that here in Des Moines?

Barber: Yep. I was over at the Lucas in the Capital. I spent a year here in 1976, I guess it was. I was in the...We had a cafeteria here downstairs.

Ferguson: Oh yeah, I keep forgetting that.

Barber: So, I learned a lot of things. I got a lot of good experience in the cafeteria business. I learned every job in the cafeteria. I would know exactly what I expected of my employees; I did everything. At one point they told me that I was the fastest blind cashier in the state.

Ferguson: Nice!

Barber: I was pretty good at that. I was pretty fast. I could pretty much...I got to know my customers, so I knew what they were going to do, and so forth. I had lots of fun. I enjoy the customers immensely.

But, anyway, I got out of that and I went to work for Wells Fargo. I was their first totally blind customer service representative in the credit card area. So, I was there, I was with Wells Fargo, first with the credit card, and then with the mortgage side, where I paid insurance premiums and did fund certifications and that sort of thing; and did other reports. I was there for about five and a half years. It was during that time that I...We were using DOS, of course, on the computer and then they switched to Windows. I didn't know anything about Windows.

There was a person from Freedom Scientific who came here to the Center to teach the staff here about Jaws for Windows, and so I was invited to come and learn. I was elated that they thought I could do that. I came here and I

was here for three or four days; learned what I needed to learn and went back to work. That really helped.

So, then I heard about a grant that Karen Keninger had applied for, for the Department, that would help put together and distribute tutorials that taught blind people how to use Windows from a strictly keyboard approach. A staff member who was working here called and said, "You ought to apply." Oh, I said, "I never graduated from college. They'd never hire me." And she said, "I bet they will." I hadn't realized that she had already put in a word for me, and so anyway...So, I decided I would. I wrote my cover letter and got my resume up to date and gosh, I got a call, "Would you come in for an interview?" I was totally shocked. I got here and had a one-hour interview and, oh, it was a few days later and I got the job offer and I took it.

It was a three-year job and they said when they hired me, they said, "You know it's only for three years?" "Yeah, okay. I'll take a chance." As we got into about a year and a half or two, we decided to apply for another grant because we weren't done yet. We applied and got another five-year grant. So, here I go. What was supposed to be three years turned, now turned into eight, and then we applied for another two-year grant. So, we got that. So, I just kept on going. I'm in my fifteenth year so; but it was good.

We produced tutorials and we've distributed tutorials several places around the world; France, Russia, Ireland, Norway, the UK...Ireland, I think I said that. We distributed tutorials everywhere. The started out being free, and then we started doing them on-line and people were paying for them. We were charging \$35 or something like that. We really saved a lot of jobs for people, and got people into jobs they wouldn't be able to if they had not taken our tutorials.

It was fun being a part of that whole process. It was very educational for me. I sure didn't know anything about Windows. I learned a lot of stuff in those years; it was nice.

Ferguson: So, are you still in the same position doing the similar thing that you...

Barber: No, I'm in the same position. The position title has not changed, but what I do now is completely different. It doesn't even resemble what I started out with.

Ferguson: So, what's your title?

Barber: I'm an Assistive Technology Analyst still, but I don't do training. I train clients who need to learn more about Windows and the computer. I do work-site assessments when that's required. I do other things, you know, keep up with what's going on in the world of assistive technology. I attend different conferences a lot of times out of my own pocket because the Department can't, you know, we're not able to afford that anymore. So, I go to what they call CSUN in San Diego. That's a major disabilities conference that's held every year.

Ferguson: What does CSUN stand for?

Barber: California State University at North Ridge.

Ferguson: Okay.

Barber: I've made a lot of friends in the assistive technology community and I've just done a lot...Plus, I work very closely

with the International Braille and Technology Center at the National Federation for the Blind. I know several of the people who work there. I've been there to tour. I've been there. Oh, I went there one time because I needed to learn a lot about accessible voting machines. I probably saw about every one there was. There were about ten or eleven of 'em, different kinds. Having done that, I was able to come back here and recommend to our Secretary of State which voting machine we should be using, which was the AutoMARK. So, he took my word for it and that's what they're doing.

One of the other things that happened throughout the years was because of networking with people, and so forth. I was the one who was responsible for bringing talking ATMs to Iowa.

Ferguson: Really?

Barber: Yep, through Wells Fargo. That was back in the late '90s or very early 2000s, something like that. So, Wells Fargo started it and then Bank of America followed suit later on. Bank of America; that was a result of the National Federation of the Blind's efforts.

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Barber: That's how talking ATMs actually came to Iowa in the first place.

Ferguson: I did not know that.

Barber: That's a good thing, because blind guys before that, we didn't have a good way. You always had to have

somebody help you use an ATM or else go to a teller and get your business done that way. Now, you know, you can plug a headset into an ATM that's got that capability, and you can do your own banking; get your own money and the whole works. I'm really proud of that.

Ferguson: You should be.

Barber: That was a big, big thing. That was a big thing here in Iowa. That was good.

Ferguson: Great. I kind of wanted to go back to when you were talking about when you were first hired in the grant process, and you said that you didn't think you'd get an interview and you were really nervous. I just wondered if you mentioned because you didn't have a college education.

Barber: Right.

Ferguson: Was that your whole belief? Or did you just not have faith in your own abilities?

Barber: Well, that was the major part of it. I knew I could figure out...I already knew how to use a computer. That part didn't bother me so much. I just knew I had not ever completed college, and thought that's going to be a huge mark against me. I don't know if it was or not. I still got the job so.

Ferguson: Yeah, and you're still here. It's turned out okay.

Barber: Oh yeah.

Ferguson: I kind of wanted to go into talking more about the technology. I guess, it's not something that we'd had crop up in other interviews. I was just kind of wondering what are some of the general devices you think you use on a daily basis? Kind of how those, if they've evolved and changed since you've been here?

Barber: Oh gosh, they've evolved since I had my job at Wells Fargo. As a matter of fact, when I started at Wells Fargo, of course, we used computers that had a DOS screen reader at the time. That was the first time I had, you know, I was introduced to that kind of stuff.

I remember when I first started with learning to use... 'cause I knew I was going to learn to use a computer, and so I started learning; I learned all this on my own. Because there wasn't... The Department didn't have anybody to teach you stuff. I started to learn to use the computer, not having a clue what I was doing. So, I'd ask a lot of questions of people and I learned how to do that.

When I got to Wells Fargo I used, of course, a slate and stylus to take notes and I used, of course, the screen reader. Well, it became real evident that we were having trouble with the screen reader working with their particular applications. There were too many key conflicts and it was just creating a huge mess. It was very apparent that it was because this technology wasn't working right, that I might not have a job for much longer. So, some investigation was done into a Braille terminal, and so we got what we call an Alva Braille terminal. It was an 80-cell display. We got it hooked up there. The guy from HumanWare came. I remember he came about 4 or 4:30 that night and he got

that thing hooked up, and all of a sudden I was able to read that screen with that Braille display and everything was working great and I was able to get, find stuff quick on the display; much quicker than I could with the speech. So, you know, that saved my job; that really did. I was pretty excited about that, as you can imagine.

The other thing, the other device that I got was a device called a Braille 'n Speak. That little device was made by Dean Blazie, and it was the coolest little thing. It had a 6-key Perkins style keyboard on it with a space bar in the middle. And, I can't remember if there were any other keys on there or not. I don't think there was. But anyway, it was a very small device. You could fit it in your coat pocket, you know. I was able to take notes. It didn't have any Braille. There was no Braille display or anything like that. But, I was able to take notes with that thing and transfer files, and all that kind of stuff.

I'll tell you, that was another thing that helped in that job. I had to take notes when we had classes in finances, and all this kind of stuff. We had to figure out how to do daily balances, average daily balances and all that stuff, and how to deal with our credit card customers and stuff. I'll tell you, it was something that I used immensely. I think I finally wore it out.

Then that evolved into later on what they call the Braille Light, which was the same thing except it had a Braille display. I think mine had a 40-cell display. Gosh, I could read on the Braille display and it was just, again, with the use of Braille, it was very helpful to me during these times.

When I got here, of course, I had my Braille display that I used quite a bit. Then as the note takers evolved into the

Windows CE platform, I think my first...I had the Braille Light still, and when this one Braille Note, let's see. Yeah, the Braille Note from HumanWare. When it came along I gave my, I turned my Braille Light back to the Department. In fact, we gave it to another client who needed one. So, I did that and I started learning the Braille Note and learned all about that. And then, oh let's see, the Braille Note; and then there was the Braille Note Empowered, which came along which was just another, just another upgraded device. Same company, HumanWare.

And, then GW Micro, of course, we were working with them like with their Window Eyes, and so forth. Then they were getting into the note taker arena. And, the first thing that they came out with was the Voice Sense. That was one about the same size as the Braille 'n Speak pretty much. Same sort of idea, but it was on Windows CE platform. That was a good device. I beta tested that, so I was able to buy that at about half price when the time came. And so, that came along.

Then they developed one with a Braille display called Braille Sense. I got that; I still use that today periodically. I still use a Braille Note product which is now the Apex, the Braille Apex. I use it a lot. I use it to pair with my iPhone so I can actually send text messages; I can take notes with it. That sort of thing. Gosh, and over the years I've had, I've bought several different cell phones and the screen readers for cell phones.

The problem with technology is there's always something better. Just when you think you've reached the pinnacle then something else comes along. Oh, I've got to have that; I probably need that. But, I just got the iPhone about a month or two months ago; maybe a month and a half

or two months ago. I use it a lot. I've taken notes on that for things at work, and so forth. It's a good device to use. It's not nearly as expensive as the Braille Note and the Braille 'n Speak and the Braille Sense, and so forth. It's way less expensive.

Ferguson: Kind of leading away from the technology, I wanted to go into your advocacy work. I hear that you were involved in the '70s and the '80s? Are you still a member of the NFB?

Barber: Oh yeah. I am the President of our Iowa affiliate right now.

Ferguson: Okay. I wasn't sure if you still were.

Barber: Still am. I'm in my fifth year. Next year will be my sixth year. Yeah, I was involved pretty heavily back in the late '60s and '70s; right up about to '80 or '81. I had a falling out with the NFB at the time over some...It wasn't philosophical issues because I always believed the philosophy of the NFB; just the way they were doing business. We had some disagreements about the right of our affiliate to do whatever, I don't know.

Ferguson: The Iowa affiliate?

Barber: The Iowa affiliate, yeah. That we had...Even if we disagreed with the National Constitution, we still had to follow it. Some of us thought, well, state's rights, you know. We had some disagreement about that. I heavily disagreed with them about that. So, some of us left and formed our

own group. I've got to be honest, I felt uncomfortable during all that time because part of me still wanted to be a part of it. But, part of me sort of went along with friends, and so forth. I sort of stuck with the friends; I regret it. I should never have done that. But, at the time I felt it was the right thing to do, and so.

Ferguson: What year was that?

Barber: It was about 1980. That's pretty close. And so, for a while I was in the other group. It was called the United Blind of Iowa. It was basically, it was a nothing group. It was just a group; we didn't do a lot. We didn't do anything that I knew about. Then some people decided that we ought to forge a relationship with the American Council for the Blind. I was against that because the American Council for the Blind was an offshoot, it was a splinter group from the National Federation of the Blind back in the 1960's, 1961. There were many of us who were opposed to that, because we had been taught and believed that ACB was not a group we needed to associate with. The only reason that people wanted to associate with them is so we could have a national connection with somebody. It finally passed. There was a lot of division about that.

I didn't get real heavily involved with it until, oh I don't know, it was the mid-'90s maybe. I started becoming a little bit more involved and I was President of the Des Moines chapter of the group. Because at the time, the group really still was really doing nothing. It wasn't going anywhere. If I want to be a part of a group we ought to be trying to do something. Things weren't still really going all that well for the group, and I was getting more and more uncomfortable

with the group. I went to two or three of the National Conventions of the ACB, and was just totally unhappy with the way they were doing business. Too much, I guess, there was too much anti-NFB sentiment for my liking. I just got tired of it.

They had a guy come here to speak who, the guy who is currently the President of the ACB, and he came here and spoke. He made fun of the philosophy of Dr. Jernigan. That really turned a lot of us off. We weren't part of the NFB, but we thoroughly believed in the philosophy and we believed in the things that Kenneth Jernigan did here in Iowa to get things going; to make things such a success. He did that and that really turned us off. That's when I began to think, "I don't think I want to be part of this anymore. I don't belong here. I shouldn't be here."

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Barber: I was slated to be the next President of the Iowa affiliate of the ACB. I finally told somebody, I said, "I'm not going to run. I don't agree with the National Office of the ACB and I cannot in good conscious be the President of an affiliate when I don't agree with them." So I said, "You need to find somebody else." So, that didn't make people happy, but that's the way it goes.

I left the ACB and joined the NFB in oh, my gosh, 2002 I think it was; 2001 or 2002. I've been a member ever since. I've been active; I do what I can to support the organization. I go, I attend our Washington Seminar every year. I go there and talk to Congress about the needs that we have and about Legislation, and so I've been there several years in a

row and enjoy it thoroughly. Several years in a row now, and enjoy it thoroughly.

Ferguson: Good. So, when...So, you're currently President of your NFB Iowa affiliate. When did you become President?

Barber: Back in 2006.

Ferguson: Back in 2006. So, you joined around 2002 and became President in 2006?

Barber: Right.

Ferguson: And, do you...Was there a change in duties, kind of, when you became President? I guess, did you...Were there certain things you started doing more of or?

Barber: I guess, I just did more of, well I guess, the change would be I was more of a spokesman for the organization. I did a lot of things like that. Now, I will tell you there were people who believe that a, that an employee of the Department for the Blind should not be President of the Iowa affiliate. Some people who opposed me felt that way; didn't think the agency had a place in the organization. And, there are people here in the agency, including our Director, who does not believe...And, I say this factually. I know she believes this; that I should not be President of the affiliate and be an employee here. We've had these discussions.

Ferguson: What's the reason, the general reasoning behind that?

Barber: Conflict of interests.

Ferguson: Okay.

Barber: And, I told her...I said to her that...

'Cause when I attend a Commission Board meeting I always take vacation; which I should do. When I speak for the organization it's on my own time, and I have that right and we've had that discussion. We've agreed to disagree. She's not going to have it any other way. So, that is...And, she's not the only one here at the agency, there's others. I know Sandy Tiegus feels that way, and others from the agency who have had these discussions. But, you know, the thing is the agency needs a good strong consumer group behind them. I thoroughly believe, I believe the agency cannot survive without a good strong consumer group, because if there are things that the agency needs, there's nothing like a bunch of good strong consumers going over to the Legislature saying, "Listen you guys, have to support these people. You've got to support the budget and all that kind of stuff." There's nothing like that. So, I'm...And with me, yeah, I work here. But, you know, really what better opportunity I work for the agency. It gives me an opportunity to know what's going on here, and be able to better advocate as far as the Federation is concerned, and help.

We wrote a letter to the Legislature earlier this year asking them not to cut our budget any further. I showed it to Karen and I said, "What do you think?" She liked it, you know. It's that kind of thing we just kind of do. I don't think it's wrong. It would be wrong if I were doing NFB business on State time. If I were using my position as a staff member

to influence NFBI members. That would be totally wrong. I am very, very careful about not mixing NFB and work. I am just really, real careful about that. And, Karen knows that. We've had that discussion, too.

Ferguson: Kind of going back, because you've been involved with the ACB and the NFB. So, I was just kind of wondering with your experience did you notice, like, their differences. Was it mainly in the philosophies, or was it the way they did business, or kind of a bit of both?

Barber: Well, I think I can best answer that...There was an article back in the, I think it was in the February or March 2001 Forum. It was called "Shoppers Rights." Maybe that's the wrong issue, I'm not sure. But, really the "Shoppers Rights" article talked about blind people going shopping independently. It talked about the fact that stores really needed to help these blind people around the store. It was basically the store's responsibility. I got really angry when I read that article. I thought, "That's not at all the store's responsibility." To me that's kind of the philosophy of the ACB. "You guys got to help us. You owe it to us."

The NFB doesn't work that way. We figure blind people ought to be able to figure it out. We don't think society necessarily should change itself to necessarily meet our needs. We live in a sighted world, that's all there is to it. It's predominately a sighted world. Yeah, I think and I believe the NFB...The NFB believes that society ought to give us a chance to prove ourselves on our merits. We ought to have training. We ought to be provided the opportunity and the training that we need so that we can get out there and perform in our community as family members, as

employees, as employers, whatever the case might be. That's what we want. We want opportunity. We want training. We want that opportunity. But, the ACB feels a little bit different. I think they just feel, like, I kind of get the idea that they feel like society owes us. Society, in my view, doesn't owe us anything except a chance.

Ferguson: Okay. Kind of speaking along with your advocacy work or what you've been involved in, you mentioned, like, you going to D.C. and to the Legislature, or talking about legislation and things like that. Are there any kind of reoccurring issues that you've noticed that, perhaps, keep popping up? Or something that hasn't been taken care of that you think has a great need?

Barber: Well, I think one of the things that keeps cropping up are on time books for college kids. We've got the K-12 situation settled, but we still need on time books for the college kids. That stuff keeps cropping up.

We need to figure out a better way for people on SSDI, who want off of it eventually, to be able to get off of it without...The way it is right now, you've earned "X" amount of money. You earned, I think it is \$1,670 a month; that's your cut-off. If you go over that you loose everything all at once. We think a better way to do it would be to come up with some kind of a gradual, you know, a gradual way of going down. Now, it's my understanding there's a study being done now at the Social Security Administration is doing a study about this. But, I think that has to do with the efforts that we've made in trying to get Congress to pass something like this. Somebody's finally listening. Will it happen? I don't know for sure what will happen. Right now

the way it is though, it's a disincentive. So, we see it here at the Department all the time, where we have clients who they don't want to loose their Social Security Disability, so they might just get a part-time job instead of getting a nice full-time job that doesn't quite pay enough. So, a lot of people will either do that or they won't work at all. They figure it's easier for me not to work, you know, where I can still keep my SSDI. So, it's a disincentive. We're hoping that Social Security will create more of an incentive to get off of SSDI eventually.

Ferguson: Is there anything specifically related to Iowa issues or anything like that, that you've seen that keeps cropping up?

Barber: Well, I mean nothing that says Iowa particularly, but of course, we're trying to...This year we're trying to get a commission formed. We're trying to get Congress to form a commission to study this whole problem with education of kids K-12, so that the expectations of those kids are raised and the expectations of the teachers. Kids aren't being taught Braille like the ought to be. Kids should have at least an hour a day in Braille. Kids who have low vision should still be learning Braille, whether they've got vision or not. Because a lot of times those kids with low vision loose their sight anyway. And, it would be more efficient for them to learn Braille a lot of times, instead of putting their nose right down to a book and trying to read the silly thing. So, there's nothing...

I guess, one of the things we did earlier is we wrote...There was going to be a move, and I think it's pretty well squelched now. There was going to be a move to take

away the older blind funds and give it to the Independent Living Centers, and create some kind of Independent Living Center Administration arm of some sort. And, that would have just killed our Independent Living programs here at the Department. So, we wrote to Harkin's office and we wrote to, who else did we write to? Harkin's office for sure, and plus I had my relative who is in the Senate, Senator McCoy, write a letter to Harkin encouraging them not to do this because Harkin was sort of helping to get this going. We were involved in that. I'm not saying we were responsible for it not happening, but I think our voice was heard, so.

Ferguson: I guess, one of my concluding or wrap-up questions. I'm just kind of wondering if you either, personally or just looking at it from the outside, have seen a change in the attitudes towards blindness since you went to Vinton, since you were in grade school and then up to now? I guess, either related to Iowa specifically or since you've worked on a national level?

Barber: I think there is a better awareness of what blind people can do. In the last forty to fifty years I think there's a much better, greater awareness. I still see some of the old attitudes though, you know. I still see that out there. I see it in the employment arena. Employers...it's very difficult to get a job; an employer to hire a blind person. They just have this misconception that they're going to have to do so much stuff to get a blind person to work there. And then, gee, what if I have to get rid of them; will they sue me and all that sort of thing? There's still a lot of that I think that exists today. There are still the prejudices and so there's still...We still see the lower expectations, as far as

education is concerned for blind kids. We still have to work with parents.

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Barber: We still have to work with the educators to say, “You raise the bar. Make sure that these guys know that you’re expected to achieve. We don’t expect anything less but achievement from you.” If a person knows that that’s expected of them, then they’ll do it. For the most part they will. So, you know, there’s been improvement. We’re not home yet; we’re not home. There’s still a lot of work to be done.

Ferguson: Have you seen any improvement in the employment area in terms of like, are there more jobs available would you say?

Barber: You know, one would think that with the advent of computers and Windows and all kinds of stuff that this should open everything, wide open for a blind guy. Unfortunately, it’s almost the exact opposite is true. And, the reason is, I’ll just give you an example. For instance, insurance companies, what they do now in their call centers, they scan the incoming document and they scan it to an image. Well, screen readers can’t do that. They cannot read the image. So, a blind person in a call center is at a huge disadvantage. If somebody says I need you to look at my policy, we can’t. It’ll come up on the screen, but the screen reader doesn’t see it, and doesn’t know it exists as far as the screen reader’s concerned. So, that kind of stuff has really put us at a huge disadvantage.

Applications, proprietary applications, are written in these different businesses. They're not Windows standards. There's no tab order; they're not keystroke friendly. It's all mouse driven. So, we're out of the ballpark there, you see. Yeah, to a certain extent we can program a screen reader to help do some of it, but the problem of doing that is you can program it one day, next week they change something and it's broken again. You go back and you fix it, and it brakes again. An agency just can't keep doing that. So, you know, I wish I could say that there was just oodles and gobs of jobs for a blind person to have. Unfortunately, I don't think we're finding that to be the case. That's my opinion anyway.

Ferguson: Okay. Well, I've run through my list of questions. If you don't have anything else to add, we can wrap it up.

Barber: Okay. I do very much appreciate the opportunity to have taken part in this interview. I will say to you that I'm really glad I was born in Iowa and had the opportunities that I had here. Back in 1968, I think it was, Harold Russell, who was the Chairman of the President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped, he said, "If one must be blind then it's better for that person to be blind in Iowa than in any other place in the nation or in the world;" and he's right. It's absolutely true. We here in Iowa have enjoyed opportunities beyond any measure. If Kenneth Jernigan hadn't come to Iowa, if the National Federation for the Blind had not helped him get here as part of what was called the "The Iowa Experiment;" if that had not been done, I don't even know what I'd be doing today. I'm not even sure. I wouldn't be here, that's for sure. I wouldn't have had near

the opportunities that I have had and have been privileged to enjoy.

Ferguson: Okay. Well, thank you, again, very much.

Barber: You are welcome.

1:04:22

(End of Recording)

Deb Brix

June 21, 2011